

Home by TheBestEver222

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Summary: "Don't let them win, Mike. If you wanna wear a skirt, then you keep wearing a skirt everyday until they give up on trying to stop you, okay' By the time Mike figures out how to answer, Nancy's already out of the car and running to catch up with Steve. She's sort of glad she doesn't have to answer. She's ashamed to admit that she might not be brave enough to do that."

Home

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Will is the first person that doesn't make Mike feel out of place. They're only in kindergarten, but she feels like Will is the only one who she can say "I like nail polish" to and not get looked at like she's crazy. In fact, when she does say it, Will replies with, "Me too." So when she invites Will over one day after school, they sneak up to her sister's room and steal a bottle of hot pink nail polish and giggle while they paint each other's fingernails to the best of their five-year-old abilities.

When they get made fun of at school the next day, Mike can't find it in herself to feel upset. She doesn't quite understand why, but she remembers her and Will smiling at each other last night and feels warm inside, and she knows that no matter what the bullies say, they won't bring her down from this elated feeling.

...

It's in fifth grade that they start changing for gym class, and the experience is so uncomfortable that Mike finds herself wearing extra clothes under her regular clothes so she can convince her teachers that she's changed without actually changing. She thinks it's stupid that changing for gym is worth a grade, but she can't do anything about that so she works around it.

"Why don't you just change like a normal person?" Dustin asks her one day while the four of them are sitting on the bleachers, waiting to be called for a team. It's safe to start a conversation, because they all know they'll be waiting for a while.

"Because," Mike says, but that's all she says, because she doesn't really know, or doesn't want to admit she knows, even to herself.

"Because it's uncomfortable sometimes," Will finishes for her, and she remembers back to their hot pink nails and thinks maybe Will gets this too.

"Guess that makes sense," Lucas says, running a hand over his close-cut hair and looking off to the side. "Anyone would feel a little awkward around that many half-naked people."

"I don't," Dustin replies with a shrug, "but maybe I'm just weird."

"Maybe," he says, mutters Mike, which starts them all chuckling and jabbing elbows into Dustin's side.

In the midst of their jeering, Will reaches out and grabs Mike's hand, squeezes it, and Mike knows she's understood.

...

It's the summer before sixth grade when Mike finally says it aloud for the first time.

It's late, and she's huddled on the floor with Will because you can't build a fort on a bed. The night's dark and quiet, and she's hardly any louder when she whispers to Will, "I'm a girl."

"Me too," Will replies just as softly, then adds on as if it was never meant to be put into words, "sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

"Yeah. And sometimes I'm a boy."

"What are you right now?"

"Neither, I think."

"Neither?"

"Uh-huh."

"How can you be neither?" Mike asks, looking at Will with her brow crinkled in confusion.

"I-I don't know, I just- I am." Will's voice shakes, so Mike reaches out and intertwines their fingers like Will did that one time in the gym.

"What do I call you?"

"Well," Will says, shuffling slightly beside her, "I'd say he when I'm a boy, she when I'm a girl, and... they when I'm neither, I guess. And Will all the time." Will shifts again, turning on their side to face Mike. "Is your name still Mike?"

"Yeah," she says, and smiles at the fact that Will asks.

"Okay."

"Okay."

...

Mike "borrows" her sister's makeup sometimes. Never her clothes, because Nancy's small in all the places Mike's not and even her old clothes won't fit, but their skin tones are fairly similar, so Mike dabbles and tries to prepare for the day she's brave enough to walk outside and proclaim herself a girl to the entire world.

She thinks she's just getting the hang of mascara, leaning in close to the bathroom mirror so she can get a better look, when the door opens, and Mike whips her head around to see Nancy walk in, looking frustrated.

"Mike, have you seen-"

Mike's still as a statue, staring wide-eyed at Nancy who stares wide-eyed back. Mike's heart is in her throat, and she feels like she's going to be sick. She can't breathe.

Then, Nancy's mouth turns down in a frown and her hands find their way to her hips. "So *this* is where all of my makeup's been disappearing to. And you're not even using it right!"

Mike's brain cannot comprehend her sister's response, so she just stands there while Nancy approaches and takes the tube of mascara out of her hand.

"Okay, Mike, listen up. If you're going to wear makeup, then you're going to do it right, because no sibling of mine is going to walk around looking like a damn raccoon. Now, wash that mess off and I'll show you how to do mascara properly, and maybe this weekend I'll

buy you some of your own makeup so you can stop *stealing* mine," Nancy says, wetting a rag under the faucet and holding it up to Mike's face.

For a moment, Mike just stares at it, but after Nancy grabs her hand and places the rag in it, she holds it for several seconds, not doing anything, and then she bursts into tears.

Nancy sighs and takes the cloth from Mike's hand, wiping away the black trails running down her cheeks. Mike wants to hug her but doesn't because she knows the mascara will stain Nancy's shirt. Nancy hugs her anyway.

After a while, when Mike starts to calm down and Nancy pulls back to look at her, Mike gets the feeling her sister's really seeing her for the first time.

"So... Little sister?" Nancy says, carefully, like she's giving Mike the chance to say no just in case she's wrong.

But Mike doesn't say anything, nods instead, and Nancy hugs her again and whispers in her ear, "Still a dork, though," and Mike laughs wetly into her shoulder.

...

A month later, Mike goes to school dressed like a girl for the first time.

Nancy buys her a skirt and a matching shirt, and helps her with her makeup because Mike really doesn't want to mess it up. They hold hands as Nancy basically smuggles her out the door because Mike is nervous and scared and knows there will be people who have a problem with her, but holding her sister's hand gives her comfort and confidence, like holding Will's hand does. She has to let go so that she can ride her bike and Nancy can get into the car with Steve, but she tries to remember the feeling all the way to school so she doesn't chicken out.

When Mike parks her bike beside her friends', she can *feel* people staring. She hears them whisper things like "Who's *that*," and "Is she

new?" and realizes with a start that *nobody recognizes her*.

She brushes her longish hair out of her face and hurries to class without meeting anyone's eyes.

She's *almost* late, but she gets there before the teacher and collapses in her chair beside Dustin. Mrs. Haley walks in and starts taking attendance – even though it's three months into the school year and she should know most of their names by now – and just as she's getting to the 'c's, Mike gets tapped on the shoulder and turns to find Dustin smiling politely at her and already speaking.

"*Madame*, you must be new, but you see, that's my friend Mike's seat-" Dustin pauses suddenly, leans forward with narrowed eyes, then pulls back with a gasp and says, "*Mike?*"

She nods, smiles sheepishly, and says, "Yeah, it's me."

Lucas grabs her shoulder and turns her around to face him. "Woah, *dude*. Did Nancy make you dress up like that this morning?"

"Umm..." Mike fingers the hem of her shirt nervously, listening to Mrs. Haley's voice.

"Did Nancy-"

"Dustin Henderson!"

"Here!" Dustin calls over his shoulder before turning back to Mike. "Did Nancy really make you dress like that? Cuz that's not cool."

"No..." Mike starts, fidgeting in her chair. She knew she'd have to explain herself to Dustin and Lucas, she just always figured she'd know what to say when it happened. She should have prepared, but she thinks she's so nervous that it probably wouldn't have mattered anyway. "Nancy didn't make me wear this... I mean, she bought it... for me, but I-"

"Lucas Sinclair!"

"Here!" Lucas half-raises his hand without taking his eyes off Mike.

She's panicking. Why did she do this? Why did she think this was a good idea?

"*I don't wanna hide anymore,*" she recalls telling Nancy. "*It kinda sucks, a lot.*"

Mike takes a deep breath and folds her hands. "I wanted to-"

"Michael Wheeler!"

She freezes, feels like a deer caught in headlights, then slowly raises her hand and says softly, "Here."

Mrs. Haley looks up from her attendance sheet and glances at Mike from behind her thick glasses, then looks back down and opens her mouth to presumably call out another name before her head snaps up, and she just *stares*. After several long moments, she exclaims, "What *are* you wearing, Mr. Wheeler?"

Suddenly, *everyone* is looking, and Mike slides down in her chair to escape their gazes. Mrs. Haley walks up to her desk in the front row and motions for Mike to stand. She really wants to refuse, but she knows it will only make things worse. She's not sure exactly why Mrs. Haley wants her to stand, but it can only mean something *bad*.

When Mike is out of her seat, Mrs. Haley starts walking to the door, and Mike can only assume she wants her to follow, so she does. She glances back at the class while Mrs. Haley pauses at the door to get another teacher to watch them and sees two boys snickering to each other in the back and a third mouthing "faggot" to her. Dustin and Lucas are staring at her with eyes like saucers, and Will is looking at her helplessly.

And then Mike is being led out of the classroom. She stares at the floor the whole way to their destination, and realizes with something like horror that Mrs. Haley has brought her to the principal's office.

"Why are we here?" Mike asks quietly as they enter, wringing her hands. When she gets no response, she says, "I didn't do anything wrong."

Mrs. Haley looks back at her, a look in her eyes that suggests she

doesn't know how to respond, then she says, "We're going to call your parents."

Mike's mouth goes dry, and she licks her lips in hopes that it will help, but it doesn't, and she only gets the taste of lipgloss stuck on her tongue. "My parents?"

Mrs. Haley doesn't answer and instead asks the lady at the desk for the principal and a phone. When the man himself opens his office a few minutes later after a quick phone call, Mrs. Haley ushers Mike inside and closes the door behind her.

Mrs. Haley explains the story, and the principal looks at Mike like she's grown three extra heads. As he dials her home number, Mike clenches her hand and tries to imagine she's holding Nancy's to keep herself from freaking out. It doesn't work.

"Hello, Mrs. Wheeler?" the principal greets the person on the other line, smiling charmingly despite the fact that Mike's mom can't see him. "Yes, I've got Michael here in my office, and I was wondering if you were *aware* of the fact that he's come to school dressed in girl's clothing?"

There's a pause as her mother answers, and the principal's smile slips off his face. "You were?"

Mike's jaw goes slack, but she quickly shuts it and tries to act natural. It's not her mother on the other line.

"Well, that's all well and good, but we *do* have a dress code, and we expect it to be followed. Boys are not allowed to wear that kind of clothing. You'll have to come pick him up."

There's mumbling that Mike can't understand, and the principal frowns. "I know it will interfere with his education, but we can't let him walk around like that."

There's only a short pause before he says, "Because it's improper, and we don't allow that sort of thing here."

There's a long moment where nothing is said at all, but then Mike hears a loud and resigned "okay" from the phone and the principal

smiles again.

"Good. He'll be waiting outside with his things." And he hangs up the phone.

After all her things are given to her by Mrs. Haley and she's left to stand outside of the school, a car pulls up in front of her, and it is definitely not her mother inside.

"You're so lucky I was there to pick up the phone and they didn't call mom's work."

Mike could cry at the sight of her sister, but instead she opens the back door of Steve's car and hops in. As they drive back to the house, Nancy is grumbling about how unfair it is that Mike should be sent home just for wearing a skirt, and Steve is humming in agreement despite the fact that he looks like he feels awkward about the whole situation.

When they pull up to their house, Steve exits the car and Mike is about to do the same when Nancy turns to her and says, "Don't let them win, Mike. If you wanna wear a skirt, then you keep wearing a skirt everyday until they give up on trying to stop you, okay?"

By the time Mike figures out how to answer, Nancy's already out of the car and running to catch up with Steve. She's sort of glad she doesn't have to answer. She's ashamed to admit that she might not be brave enough to do that.

After school, Lucas, Dustin, and Will show up, and Mike quickly ushers them to the safety of her basement before they can say anything.

"What the *hell* was that today?" Lucas asks once Mike's made sure her parents won't overhear their conversation. "Will said that Nancy didn't make you wear it, but that's *all* he said!"

Will winces at the word "he" and shuffles her feet. "It wasn't my place."

"Why didn't you just tell us you had to dress in drag for a dare or whatever?" Dustin asks, and he doesn't shout like Lucas, but he's just

as confused.

"It's not drag," Mike says, "and I wanted to do it."

"Why would you *want* to dress like a girl?" Lucas asks incredulously.

"Because I'm a girl!" Mike shouts, arms spread wide like she's trying to *show* them the truth.

There's silence for a beat, and then Lucas says, "Oh."

"Yeah, *oh*," Mike mutters.

Dustin glances between her and Will and says, "And you told Will and not us?"

"What? No! I didn't tell Will- or well, I guess I sort of did, but she kind of knew already so-"

"*She*?" Lucas repeats, and Mike's eyes go wide and dart to Will.

"Will, God, I didn't mean-"

"It's okay," Will says, placating her. "I mean, since you've decided to be brave..." Mike hears the unspoken "*maybe I can, too*."

Will takes a breath and looks at them all, then says, "Today I'm a girl... and yesterday I was a boy, and tomorrow I could be one or the other or both or neither. It's... kind of a surprise."

"How come you didn't tell us?" Lucas asks them both, jaw clenched like he's angry, but Mike can tell by his glassy eyes that he's just upset.

"I wanted to tell you," Mike says, because it's true, and she wants them to know that, "but I was kind of scared. It's really... nerve-wracking, and I didn't want to cry again."

"Again?" Dustin asks with a quirked eyebrow, and there's just the slightest curve to his lips that lets her know he's halfway to a joke, and she takes her chance.

"I'm a girl, we get emotional, okay?" She smiles, and when Dustin and Lucas return it, she doesn't feel so bad anymore.

"If we're confessing things," Lucas starts, wringing his hands, "I think I like guys. And girls, too. I think girls are pretty, and I'd kiss and date a girl, but I don't know if I'd... ya know... with a girl."

"Jesus, Lucas, I didn't need to know about your sex life!" Dustin shouts, and Lucas and Will both blush at the exclamation.

"You know what I mean!" Lucas yells, sounding embarrassed.

"It's okay to like boys," Will says, ears still tinged red from Dustin's comment. "I like boys, too. I think I could like anyone, boy or girl or whatever, and..." she pauses, face going red again.

"Ya know?" Mike says, and chuckles as Will's face somehow turns even redder. "Well, I like girls, so I guess that makes me gay."

"I don't like girls," Dustin says, "or guys. Or anyone, really. Is that a thing?"

Mike shrugs. "Maybe, maybe not. Who cares? *Make* it a thing."

Dustin smiles and nods. "Yeah."

The next day, Mike goes to school wearing the same skirt and finds Will's wearing one too. Mrs. Haley stares but doesn't say anything about it, and Mike knows they've all won something.

...

In eighth grade, they get a new student. Her name is El. She sits beside Mike in history, and Mike thinks she's in love.

There's just something about the other girl; maybe it's her short, curly hair and the leather jackets she wears, or the way she smiles small and sweet but won't back down from a fight, or maybe it's just *her*. Mike isn't sure what it is exactly, but she knows it makes her heart beat faster than it ever should and makes her feel breathless at times.

It's also what makes her feel both elated and sick to her stomach

when she's paired up with El for a history project.

"So..." Mike says, turning to El. "I'm... Mike."

"I know," El replies immediately without looking up from a piece of paper she's scribbling words on.

Mike blinks slowly. El knows *her* name?

El glances up, takes in her confused features, and looks back down as she says, "You write it on your papers everyday."

"Oh," Mike says, feeling stupid. "Right."

El nods, eyes still glued to her paper. "Cool name."

"Huh?"

"You're name. I think it's cool," El says, pausing in her scrawling and meeting Mike's eyes. "Never heard it on a girl before."

Mike smiles wide, heart fluttering in her chest. El knows she's a girl without needing to be told.

"Your name's El, right?" Mike asks, even though she already knows, and when El nods in confirmation, she says, "I like your name too."

El's eyes are already back on her paper, but Mike sees the small smile that pulls at the corners of her mouth.

Mike grins so big it hurts.

...

Max Mayfield catches Mike's attention the day the kid starts at Hawkins Middle School.

There's something about the way Max snaps "It's *Max*," when Mr. Clarke introduces the redhead to the class as Maxine Mayfield that gets Mike thinking. She is quite aware of the fact that she's probably wrong about this, but maybe she's *not* wrong, maybe she's *right*, and Max feels like Mike's felt most of her life, like every time she crosses

paths with a mirror it's someone else staring back at her and not just *her*.

Mike decides then and there that she is going to befriend Max Mayfield, because even if Max isn't like her, this kid is in a new place where everyone is a stranger, and Mike at least knows what it's like to feel all alone in the world.

The first time they interact is between periods on that first day. Mike introduces herself, but Max just looks between her and her outstretched hand and says, "Isn't Mike a boy's name?"

Before Mike can even respond, the redhead is already walking away from her, and Lucas, Will, and Dustin are already joining her outside the classroom.

The second time they meet is in the lunchroom. It's less of a meeting and more of Mike marching up to Max and declaring, "I'm a girl!"

Max blinks at her and says, "I know."

"Then why'd you say my name was a boy's name?"

"Because it *is* a boy's name."

Mike folds her arms across her chest and says, "But *I'm* a girl, so that makes it a girl's name."

Max looks startled by Mike's statement, like it never occurred to the redhead that names worked like that, but Mike doesn't have a whole lot of time to think about it because she's called away by a shout from Dustin proclaiming that El is glaring holes into the back of her head and that she better get back before she goes up in flames.

By the time she turns back around, Max is gone.

Their third encounter is instigated by Max, surprisingly. It's after school, as Mike's walking home – by herself, because El had to get home right away and wasn't able to walk with her, and she didn't bring her bike because she didn't realize she'd need it.

Max follows her off school grounds at a safe distance until Mike

finally turns around and asks, "What do you want?"

Max doesn't answer the question, instead replying with, "Why is your name Mike?"

"Huh?" Mike asks, confused.

"It's usually a boy's name," Max says, holding Mike's gaze intently, "so why did your parents give it to you if you're a girl?"

"Guess my parents thought it would fit me when I grew up," Mike says with a shrug and turns to go on.

"But *why* would they think that?" Max pushes on.

Mike faces her again with eyebrows raised. "Why do you wanna know so bad?"

"Because," Max says, folding freckled hands and not meeting Mike's eyes, "I have a feeling."

"What *kind* of feeling?" Mike asks, eyes narrowing as she says, "That maybe I'm not like you?" She pauses, looks at Max, and adds, "Or maybe that I'm too much like you?"

"What do you mean?" Max asks and almost manages to sound oblivious.

Mike takes a breath and thinks to herself, *now or never, I guess*, and says, "They named me Mike because I guess they figured I'd grow into a boy's name. Parents are like that, ya know? They imagine this whole life for you in their mind when you're born, and if you don't follow it you're suddenly 'not the person they thought you were' or you're 'trying to be someone you're not,' when really the whole time they've known you, you've been pretending to be the person they thought they knew because the real you is probably someone they wouldn't like."

Max nods and says, "My brother's like that. Like your parents, I mean." Then Max scowls and spits, "Even though he's not really my brother and he's only known me for, like, not even a year. 'You've got long hair and tits! How can you be a boy?'"

After a moment, Max's eyes go wide, like he expects Mike to yell at him for what he's said, but Mike just says, "I can't imagine how much it must suck to have a sibling that doesn't support you. I'd probably still be in jeans today if it weren't for my sister." Mike motions to her skirt as she says this, twisting around so it twirls a little for effect.

"Yeah," Max says, shoulders slumped, "it totally *sucks*."

Mike studies him, then smiles and makes an offer. "You wanna come to my house?"

Max lifts his head up, eyes wide and eyebrows raised at the seemingly out-of-the-blue statement. "You're inviting me over?"

"Yeah, why not?" Mike shrugs.

"We hardly know each other."

"That's *why* I'm inviting you over," Mike explains like Max should already know. "We can get to know each other, and you can be you."

"Me?" Max asks.

"Yeah, ya know, Max and not Maxine."

"Oh."

"I mean, my parents won't entertain us, but I've got some pretty cool friends that are coming over later, and they'll call you whatever you want if you just tell 'em to," Mike says, motioning Max forward with a wave of her hand. "Come on."

"Okay," Max says, and he follows her.

The whole walk, Mike explains her friends, how today Will's pronouns are they/them – "It's been they/them for pretty much the whole month, except for two and a half days last week when it was he/him." – and how Dustin doesn't get crushes but Lucas has the biggest crush on this one dude – "Oh shit, I wasn't supposed to tell anyone his crush, forget I said that!" – and how her sister Nancy has two boyfriends that love her as much as each other – "I listened in on a phone conversation between them once, and let me tell you, *bad*

idea." – and just about everything else she can think to say to fill the silence between them and inform Max on the awesome people he's about to meet, because she wants Max to realize that he can be as comfortable and proud as her friends are.

When they finally reach her house, Mike looks over and finds Max smiling.

...

It's the end of that same year when Troy starts causing trouble for them again. Of course, he never *really* stopped, but for a while it was small things, like screaming "faggot!" anytime Mike and her friends walked by, or shooting spitballs in their direction during lunch. But today, something just sets him off.

It's the end of the day, and Will is talking to Max about his new haircut.

"It looks really good, Max," she's saying, walking in step with the redhead. "Sometimes I kind of want to get my hair cut short like that, but I usually keep it in between like this," she motions to her head as she says this, "because I feel like having longer hair a lot, too. I kinda wish I could just grow it out on command, ya know?"

Max is nodding along while Will speaks, and Mike's walking behind them holding El's hand and smiling just a little because Will's finally got someone else to talk to besides her. That's when Troy strikes.

"Hey, fags!"

Mike's smile quickly twists into a scowl, and she's not sure if she squeezes El's hand for the other girl or for herself, but she thinks it's a little bit of both.

El squares her shoulders and squeezes Mike's hand back, chin jutting out defiantly. Mike's kind of amazed at El's fierceness sometimes and remembers that that's part of the reason she liked her in the first place.

"What do you want?" El snarls at Troy. Mike's a little surprised her girlfriend's glare doesn't stop him.

"Hiding behind your queer girlfriend, now, Wheeler?" Troy sneers. He feigns a punch to the side, almost brushing Will's face with his hand. Max pulls the girl behind him and glares at the bully.

"Back off, Troy," El says in a dangerous tone, and Max is stepping forward to back her up, because, try as hard as they might, Mike knows the rest of them will never be able to win in a fight against Troy.

"What are *you* gonna do, huh?" Troy says with a smirk.

El scowls and releases Mike's hand so she can grab ahold of Troy's collar, slamming him into the wall behind him despite being just over half his size.

"El," Max says, resting a hand on El's shoulder to tell her to back off.

"Max," El says without looking away from Troy's face.

There's fear glinting behind his smirk when he says, "Listen to your dyke friend; *back off*."

Max flinches back at the insult, like it physically hurts him, and then El's fist is connecting with Troy's face, and it's all gone to hell.

Mike jumps in to help Max stop El from beating Troy to a pulp, and somewhere in the middle of the fray El's elbow collides with Mike's shoulder, sending her stumbling back. El's rage melts almost instantly, and she leaves Troy to slump to the ground in favor of rushing to her girlfriend.

"Mike, are you okay?" El asks, sounding frantic. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to hit you-"

"It's fine, El," Mike assures her, grabbing her hand in case she suddenly feels like rushing back toward Troy. "I'm fine. Just calm down."

Max is hesitantly dabbing at Troy wounds, because he might have been hurt by the bully's words but he still has a heart that's too big for his own good, and there are teachers rushing toward them and shouting and calling for a nurse.

They get dragged to the principal's office, all of them. El gets suspended for a week, but the rest of them are let off the hook because they weren't really involved, and Troy is known as a bully by all.

Even when her father yells at her later that night about getting into fights, and she gets grounded for the entirety of her suspension and then some, El still says she regrets nothing

...

The year they start high school, they have a Christmas party at El's dad's cabin. Really, it's more of a get together, but everyone brings presents and there's flashing Christmas lights, so they call it a party.

There's Christmas music playing quietly, and Mike thinks she'd be content to stay here forever, cuddled up next to El on her living room couch while soft conversations go on around them. Will is trying to convince Max to let them paint his nails by saying that boys can wear nail polish just the same as girls; they were a boy this morning when they put it on and didn't have any problems with it. Nancy and Steve are huddled around Jonathan, who's showing them pictures he's taken with his camera, and Dustin is holding a half-hearted conversation with Lucas, who's making goo-goo eyes at Max as the redhead finally agrees to let Will paint his nails a dark blue. El's father and Will's mother are talking over cups of hot chocolate, smiling faces dyed red and green by colored lights.

Mike can't remember a time when she's felt more at home. It's nice.

After several more long minutes of soft chatter, the calm is disturbed by a ding from the kitchen and El's father proclaiming, "Cookies are done."

And suddenly, everyone's moving. While the adults enter the kitchen to attend to the baked goods, Dustin elbows Lucas in the side to get his attention and motions towards the ornate tree in the center of the room, and Nancy, Steve, and Jonathan edge themselves in the same direction. Max moves to do the same, but is met with protests from Will, who is apparently not done painting his nails. Max rolls his eyes, but appeases Will and sits still once again.

El exchanges a look with Mike, and with an over-exaggerated huff from the latter, they both stand from their comfortable position on the couch and sit cross-legged around the Christmas tree with everyone else, Max and Will finally joining the group.

When the parents return, cookies are passed around, and once everyone has at least one – three in Dustin's case and five in El's – the presents get handed out.

Mike's first present comes from El. She gets her a jacket like one Mike's already stolen from her and says, "Now you can stop wearing mine."

They both chuckle at it, and Mike's sure that El knows that even though she's giving her a near-perfect replica, El's still not getting back the jacket that used to be hers. This new one isn't as worn as the other, and it doesn't still smell of El's scent – waffles and spring flowers and something Mike can never place.

Mike gives El a charm bracelet with only one charm. It's a heart with their names engraved on it, and while jewelry isn't usually El's style, Mike just had to get it for her because it reminded her so much of the other girl and she doesn't even know why.

El hugs Mike in thanks, and Mike is happy that her gift was so well-received.

Max's present from Lucas is one he's needed for a long time. He looks like he's going to cry when he opens it.

"A binder?"

Lucas nods. "I figured it's about time you got one." He shrugs, looking bashful. "I tried to get the right size, but I don't know how close I was. If it's too small, I can-"

Max wraps his arms around him and squeezes tight. "I love it. Thank you so much."

"Yeah, uh, you're welcome," Lucas says, and Mike's pretty sure he's blushing.

Nancy gets a pair of earrings from Jonathan and Steve, and at some point Dustin slides her a pack of condoms. Steve chokes on a cookie and has to hold himself back from laughing, and Jonathan blushes the color of a tomato, a quality he and his younger sibling share. Nancy almost smacks Dustin upside the head for his incessant giggling.

Dustin himself gets a packet of gummy worms and a deck of uno cards, amongst other things, and Will gets a bottle of hot pink nail polish – they make eye-content at Mike, who gave them the gift, and they both chuckle to themselves – a flowery shirt, and a unisex hoodie that will have to be kept away from Mike, because not only does she steal El's clothing but anyone else's who'll fit. It's an inside joke among them that Mike is a clothing thief.

Gift exchanging goes on for a while – there are so many more people here than Mike ever thought would be in her life.

When everyone has finally settled down again, Mike takes a moment to just take in everything.

She takes in the people around her – the good people, *her* good people, the ones who make her feel like she can take on the world. She feels a little less afraid of the unknown with them around, a little more like she won't face anything alone.

El curls into her, the girl's warmth seeping into her skin and making her feel whole. She watches Max come out of the bathroom clad in his new binder to show off to the awaiting crowd, and her heart warms at the smile on his face. She can't imagine her life without these people. She can't imagine what she'd do without these people, who she'd *be* without these people.

"Mike?"

"Huh?" Mike faces El, taken a little aback by the worry creasing her face.

"Why are you crying?" El asks.

"What?" Mike reaches up and touches her face. "Oh. I don't know. I

just... I think I just realized how important everyone in this room is to me and I'm an emotional wreck."

"Oh," El says and wraps her around Mike. "That's a good thing to cry about."

"Yeah."

Will was the first person that didn't make Mike feel out of place, but they weren't the last.

Mike is home.